

## **THE PRICE OF FAITH IN ALGERIA:<sup>1</sup> THE NEXUS OF GENDER AND RELIGION BASED ON THE FORBIDDEN WOMEN NOVEL**

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### **Introduction**

Sultana Mudjahed had to deal with a series of events that concern her pride as a woman, her faith, her identity, her community, her government and her past. Everything is in the form of a dramatic fiction written by Malika Mokeddem in her work "The Forbidden Women". Equipped with the viewpoint of the second main character, Vincent Chauvet, a French professor of mathematics who received a kidney donation from an Algerian woman, Mokeddem attempted to build a storyline by explaining the condition of the Algerian mentality. The experience of Algerian society which was once colonized by France plus the nuances of the Arab-Islamic cultural community was displayed in conversations between the main actors.

Gender and religion have always become inseparable terms in social interactions in both the western and eastern hemispheres. The Sultana in this story plays a woman who really wants to leave her past memories by leaving her homeland forever. Nevertheless, destiny brought her back to face those memories in the form of the tragic incident of the sudden death of her ex-lover, Yacine Mediane. Sultana could have let his death and continue the enjoyment of life that she had achieved so far, but she had chosen to prioritize her nostalgia over her future. Humans cannot escape the amount of memories they leave behind. At the same time, Vincent Chauvet took his breaking period as professor to visit Algeria, and instead of finding the kidney donor woman he met with Sultana. The storyline was interesting when Vincent and Sultana talked with Dalila, a 9-10 year old girl who thinks like a philosopher. This encounter will trigger a lot of questions of life for the main characters. This essay aims to discuss the relationship between gender and religion in the Algerian society and the price that Sultana's personal beliefs have to pay based on his personal experience.

### **The Funeral and the Woman**

The flow of the story begins with the return of Sultana to Algeria, her birthplace that she had never chosen before, after hearing the death of Yacine

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<sup>1</sup> Book Review: The Forbidden Woman, Mokeddem Malika, Translated by: K. Melissa Marcus, University of Nebraska Press. 1998. 154 pages.

Mediane. On the way to Yacine's place, Sultana experienced several instances of sexism. Ali Marbah, the taxi driver, who questioned the identity of Sultana by saying "Whose daughter are you?"<sup>1</sup> showed that women have no autonomous identity, instead they depend on men's backgrounds (father or husband). Her reflection on gangrenous childhood "from the youngest age, the opposite sex is already a ghost among their desires" (Malika Mokeddem, 1998) and boys routinely "hurl stones and insults at passing girls and women" because they "have never learned to love." Actually this is an educational problem and is supported by a government, in historical context, that marginalizes the southern region in Algeria as reflected by Sultana "We in the south, we are punishment, a prison cell or a garbage can for all of the Tell's nabobs. They only send us the country's riffraff." (Malika Mokeddem, 1998).

Furthermore, when Sultana arrived at the place in order to attend the funeral of her beloved one, another event had to be faced. She could not follow the funeral due to its prohibition for women (religiously). The event is a little bit confusing remembering that Algerian follows Maliki's school, while the prohibition of women to attend funerals is only in the Hanafi school. Even in Sunnis (Maliki, Syafi'i and Hambali), Shiites, Ahmadis and Alevi women are allowed to take part in funeral processions (Khadija Kadrouch-Outmany, 2018). The logical explanation for this peculiarity is illustrated in a later statement when the person who forbade Sultana from taking part in the funeral procession was the head of the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) named Bakkar.

In my opinion, religion, education, culture and politics always go hand in hand. Religion teaches that studying is an obligation for both men and women. When an authoritarian government views education as a political tool that does not have to be prioritized in the development of human resources for particular reasons, ignorance will spread even to religious leaders who are trusted by society. As a result, misinterpretations of the sacred text and the prophet's commands become cultural references with the spirit of fanaticism.

In this regard, the FIS leaders agreed on the core objective of the party's establishment, which was to create an Islamic State ruled by *sharia* law. The FIS also opposes the importation of Western cultural models and behavioral patterns, including clothing, which they consider contrary to Muslim values, especially the traditional values of modesty. The FIS also holds the belief that those who care to maintain the family as a source of moral stability in the urban environment of Algeria must oppose the contemporary Western conception of women's rights and seek to reaffirm traditional rules through the separation between sexes in public places (Roberts, Hugh. 1995). Hence, Sultana in this case was to deal with fanatical politician, at the same time she is a woman that hate everything about her identity. What an ironic match of event.

### **Hypocrisy or Honesty**

The fascinating part in the novel is the conversation between Vincent and Sultana with Dalila. The character of Dalila is unpredictable. She is an Algerian girl who has liberal thoughts, yet the shape of her family's construction model is very traditional. Her liberal thought described by her several statements such as "Heaven, it's just a nest of worms, a trap of rotten earth for catching people's live, and they always fall in." (Malika Mokeddem, 1998). The other scheme was when she told about her school teaching method that seems very orthodox and promising hell for everyone who refused the prophet family's way of life (Malika Mokeddem, 1998) (criticizing schoolmasters in orthodox environment is unusual). Sometime Dalila's point of views about life were so philosophical. For instance, she questioned "why the language we speak at home and in the street is not school language?" (Malika Mokeddem, 1998) and "why is Arabic just the language of fear, of shame and sins, especially when you are a girl?"<sup>11</sup> Dalila's criticism showed that even in the reality the term of truth is very abstract. For further questioning all of these phenomenon are they a part of honesty or hypocrisy?

Meanwhile, the pessimism inherent in Sultana's personality related to her identity and her past was illustrated by the statement that Algeria and France were considered as hypocrites. The peak of anger was expressed in the phrase "Yes, what do countries, nations matter, what do institutions and all abstract ideas matter when it's in the individual himself that the worm is immortal?" (Malika Mokeddem, 1998) Her statement did not arise from a vacuum without any reason, but departed from her disappointment at the unchanging mentality of the community, namely glorified misogyny. In this respect Salah, Yacine's close friend, confirmed that a pattern of young men from the Left who have bright and educated women as girlfriends while studying, yet marrying uneducated and obedient women whose families want them to wed (Malika Mokeddem, 1998). For me, it is the same case with the woman perspective right now. When women from the Left who have bright and handsome (or we can say a bad boy) men as boyfriends while studying, yet marrying pious and obedient men whose families want them to wed. Is it a part of honesty or hypocrisy?

In my own opinion, hypocrisy is part of honesty, and honesty is part of hypocrisy. The thing that makes them different is the desire of human being to make them different. For instance, Algerians discriminate against women is the truth while they claim to believe in Islamic teachings that teach about equality. On the other hand, France teaches how to create democracy in an undemocratic way in several countries in Africa, which in the end produces ideology that is not in accordance with their circumstances. All of this is a condition of reality that exists and can be said in two forms at the same time, honesty and hypocrisy. The point is that Sultana does not necessarily to suffer too much if she can accept all of it with an open mind. There

is a narrative that illustrates how Sultana was traumatized by the past events that she could not accept (Malika Mokeddem, 1998) due to the terms of hypocrisy and honesty, and that is the price that Sultana has to pay for her faith in Algeria.

## Conclusion

Mokeddem's *The Forbidden Woman* novel is a story that describes misogyny in Algeria. The role of Sultana as an Algerian woman who hates her identity, and Vincent, a Frenchman who gets a kidney donation from Algerian women, may have been deliberately displayed by Mokeddem as a metaphor for relationship between Algeria and France. However, the intrigue and events in the storyline of Sultana and Vincent illustrate many things about the mentality of Algerians in politics, economics, culture and education. The arrival of Sultana in Algeria brought her to her past which she wanted to forget, and indeed that was the price she had to pay when she decided to look back.

Sultana assessment of the hypocrisy of the people of Algeria and France, which often appeared in real social and political phenomena, needed a brief reflection. The hypocrisy that is displayed may be honesty which indeed must be displayed at that time. Not all hypocrisy is bad and not all honesty is good. The most important thing is the breadth of Sultana's heart to accept both sincerely. With her courage and intelligence Sultana and other women will surely be able to face all the challenges of life that are not always beautiful.

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